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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC 0031
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC 0182

C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000777

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA, DRL, AND INR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/03/2018

TAGS: [PHUM KIRF](#) [PGOV PINR](#) [PREL SOCI UZ](#)

SUBJECT: FERGHANA VALLEY ACTIVISTS AND IMAMS REPORT LESS
EXTREMIST ACTIVITY

REF: A. TASHKENT 633

[1](#)B. 07 TASHKENT 314

[1](#)C. TASHKENT 722

[1](#)D. TASHKENT 299

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: During a three-day visit to the Ferghana Valley on June 25 - 27, poloff met with several human rights activists and religious leaders who reported that religious extremist organizations like Hizb ut-Tahrir have become less active (or at least less visible) in recent years. While imams credited government efforts to promote a moderate form of Islam, human rights activists believed that the real cause has been the government's long-standing repressive measures against suspected members, as well as increased labor migration from the region, which they believe has drained the number of potential recruits. The human rights activists also reported that the number of persons in the Ferghana Valley convicted on religious extremism charges have declined in the past year. They also observed that prison conditions have improved, including for religious prisoners, but authorities continue to arbitrarily lengthen the sentences of many religious prisoners shortly before they are due to be released. Religious observance in prisons also continues to be restricted. The activists also made an unusual report of an anti-American sermon at a mosque in Margilan. While it is difficult to determine whether extremist groups have become less active or just less visible, we believe that the government's long-standing repressive measures, increased labor migration, and greater efforts by the government to promote a moderate brand of Islam may all play a role in this phenomenon. The activists' contention that the number of convictions for religious extremism has declined in the past year also tracks with our own observations, although such cases continue to occur, especially in other regions of the country. End summary.

SON OF HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST RELEASED FROM PRISON

12. (C) On June 25, poloff met with Ferghana-based human rights activist Abdusalom Ergashev, Margilan-based human rights activist Akmadjan Madmarov, and Madmarov's son Hamidullo, who was released from prison on June 6 after completing a seven-year sentence on religious extremism charges (ref A). Ahmadjan Madmarov has two other sons and two nephews still in prison on religious extremism charges (ref B). Madmarov has long-maintained that none of his relatives were actually involved in any religious extremist groups.

13. (C) Hamidullo Madmarov told poloff that for the next year, he remains under parole and must inform local authorities anytime he plans to leave Ferghana province. He also must periodically check in with authorities and report what he is doing and with whom he meets. Hamidullo's passport expired while he was in prison, but he has been given a new passport since his release. Hamidullo told poloff that he wished not to talk in detail about his experiences in prison, but observed that he was poorly fed and had lost 20 kilos while confined. He also noted with irony that before he was convicted for religious extremism, he served in the border guards under the National Security Service, and even was part of a protective detail for President Karimov at the Bukhara airport in 1999.

HAMIDULLO CONTRACTED TUBERCULOSIS IN PRISON

14. (C) Hamidullo reported contracting tuberculosis in prison, and while his tuberculosis was not active, he was still in need of treatment, which his family cannot afford. Akmadjan Madmarov and Ergashev explained that while treatment for tuberculosis at government clinics is nominally free, in reality, individuals need to pay bribes in order to receive the appropriate medicine. In addition, they noted that better treatment was available at a private clinic in Margilan (where recently released activist Mutabar Tojiboyeva was treated, see septel), but they could not afford to pay for the clinic (Comment: We have submitted a Defender's Fund Application to pay for Hamidullo's tuberculosis treatment. End comment.)

ONE SON RELEASED, OTHER HAS HIS SENTENCE EXTENDED...

15. (C) While Akmadjan Madmarov was obviously elated that Hamidullo had been released from prison, he also reported that authorities arbitrarily lengthened the sentence of his other son Habibullah Madmarov by three-and-half years in April, claiming that he was still a danger to society. Habibullah completed his original sentence in February. Akmadjan added that he has not been allowed to see Habibullah for 10 months, and was only able to have a ten minute phone conversation with him in April. Akmadjan reported being told at one point by authorities that they would release his sons if he did not speak with any representatives of foreign organizations or Embassies. However, Akmadjan said he did not believe the authorities, noting that many of their previous promises have turned out to be false. He stressed that he was a committed activist and had no plans to cease his human rights activities. Akmadjon's third son, Abdulla, is also still imprisoned at the Tavaksay prison in Tashkent province.

16. (C) Akmadjan Madmarov argued that Hamidullo, rather than Habibullah, was the exception - authorities continue to routinely and arbitrarily lengthen the sentences of religious prisoners as they approach the end of their original sentences. At Prison Colony 29 in Navoi province, where one of his nephews is being held, Madmarov reported that 63 other prisoners convicted of religious extremism had their sentences lengthened in the past year. He further stated that of 28 individuals from Margilan who had completed their original prison sentences since January, only 3 individuals, including his son Hamidullo, were actually released. Likewise in 2007, Akmadjon reported that only 4 out of 78

religious prisoners from Margilan who had completed their sentences were released from prison (Comment: Madmarov also told poloff's predecessor in March 2007 that only 4 religious prisoners had been released under the November 2006 amnesty, presumably in 2007, see ref B. Either the authorities did not release any more religious prisoners in 2007 after March or Madmarov's figures are not fully accurate. End comment.)

¶17. (C) Akmadjan Madmarov reported speaking with the director of Prison Colony 29, who allegedly told him that while individuals must sign confessions and statements of regret over involvement in religious extremist organizations before they are released, only a minority of those who sign such documents are actually released. Instead, the director reportedly told Madmarov that he receives a list from the National Security Service of the religious prisoners to be released.

¶18. (C) Even when released, Akmadjan Madmarov noted that it is very difficult for ex-religious prisoners to find employment. Of the 98 religious prisoners from Ferghana province who had been released since 1998, he said that only eight of them have since found employment. The ex-religious prisoners are not permitted to travel abroad in search of work, and must depend on their families for support or end up selling everything they own. He also reported that 14 of the

98 individuals who were released had been eventually retried and sent back to prison on religious extremism charges, including eight individuals in a single case from 2003.

MADMAROV REPORTS IMPROVING PRISON CONDITIONS....

¶19. (C) As reported recently by several other human rights activists (including Tojiboyeva, see septel), Madmarov reported that conditions at prisons, including for religious prisoners, have improved over the last year. He reported that since July 2007, religious prisoners at several prisons, including Tavaksay, have been reintegrated with the general prison population, leading to an improvement in their general treatment. Madmarov reported that religious prisoners were first separated from the general prisoner population following the Andijon events in 2005, and generally endured much harsher conditions than other prisoners.

...BUT RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE STILL RESTRICTED

¶10. (C) Akmadjan Madmarov reported that the ability of prisoners to observe their religion continues to be restricted. While prison libraries have Korans, religious prisoners are often not allowed to use them, and their ability to pray is also sometimes limited. On the other hand, he reported that prisoners convicted of other offences have fewer restrictions on their religious practices.

ACTIVITIES OF EXTREMIST GROUPS LESS VISIBLE

¶11. (C) Both Akmadjan Madmarov and Ergashev reported that extremist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir have been less visibly active in the Ferghana Valley over the past year and were no longer distributing pamphlets or organizing meetings or study sessions for members or new recruits. They said that such extremist organizations have been largely driven underground by the authorities' long-standing repressive measures against suspected members, which spiked immediately after the 2005 Andijon events. They also reported that another factor affecting the activities of religious extremist organizations is the continued outmigration of large numbers of male labor migrants from the Ferghana Valley to Kazakhstan and Russia, which has drained the number of potential recruits. As economic conditions worsen and staple prices rise, Ergashev and Akmadjan noted that labor migration from the region continues to increase.

FEWER RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM CONVICTIONS IN PAST YEAR

¶12. (C) Akmadjon Madmarov and Ergashev also reported that the government has pursued fewer criminal cases against suspected religious extremists in the Ferghana Valley in the past year. In 2007, they were aware of only one case in which five individuals in Kokand were sentenced to between seven and nine years' imprisonment on religious extremism charges. They were unaware of any individuals being convicted of religious extremism in Ferghana or Margilan in ¶2007. They speculated that the lack of convictions was largely the result of extremist groups becoming less active than before. They added that those individuals who had been released from prison have been careful not to meet with one another or do anything that might arouse suspicions. In addition, they reported that there were no known protests in the Ferghana Valley of women whose relatives were convicted of religious extremism in the past few years, as there had been previously.

NUMBER OF OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL MOSQUES HOLDS STEADY

¶13. (C) Akmadjon Madmarov and Ergashev reported that they knew of no new mosques, either official or unofficial, which opened in either Margilan or Ferghana in the past year. In addition, two maddrassahs in the Ferghana Valley that authorities converted into medical facilities remain closed (poloff also drove by one of the former maddrassahs, which still looks like a maddrassah from the side, but has been given a new glass-window facade on the front). Akmadjan said that he often worshipped at an unregistered mosque in his mahalla (neighborhood), as it was much closer to his house than the nearest officially registered mosque. He noted that authorities did not interfere in the activities of such smaller mosques, despite their lack of registration. The activists also noted that two weeks before President Karimov visited Margilan in September 2007, local authorities ordered all mosques in the city to be closed temporarily. The mosques reportedly reopened as normal after the President's departure.

MARGILAN IMAM REPORTEDLY ATTACKS PRESIDENT BUSH IN SERMON

¶14. (C) Akmadjan Madmarov reported that an imam in Margilan recently claimed that President Bush was anti-Muslim during Friday prayers and criticized American efforts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Akmadjan said he was shocked to hear the imam's words, turning to his son, who was also at the mosque, to make sure he heard the imam's words correctly. He later confirmed that other imams in Margilan had made the same remarks during Friday prayers that week. Ergashev also confirmed that he heard the same points raised by an imam in Ferghana (Comment: Imams receive talking points from the state-controlled Muftiate in Tashkent each week, and rarely deviate from those talking points during Friday prayers. It would be highly unlikely for an imam to make such statements unless they were approved in advance by the authorities. The fact that the talking points were used by other imams the same week also suggests that this was a coordinated government message. Local Embassy staff did not hear any similar sermons being made in Tashkent. We will investigate. End comment.)

¶15. (C) Akmadjan allowed that there were occasions in the past where imams clearly veered from government-approved talking points during Friday Prayers. He remembered that around the time Saddam Hussein was arrested by American soldiers in Iraq, he heard another imam in Margilan criticize "such dictators" and state that Hussein's arrest demonstrated that if countries did not "clear out their sewers, then the Americans would do it for them."

MEETING WITH IMAM HAFIZOV IN FERGHANA

¶16. (C) On June 25, poloff met with Abduvali Hafizov, the Head Imam of the Yangi-Chek Mosque in Ferghana. The meeting was arranged by Ergashev, who attends the Yangi-Chek Mosque. Hafizov is an alumnus of an International Visitors (IV) program exchange which sent Uzbek Muslim leaders to the United States for several weeks in 2002. Hafizov shared his fond memories of the United States with poloff, noting that he had learned much about the practice of Islam and other religions in America. He noted with regret that the program was no longer continuing, and articulated his belief that it should be restarted in the future. According to him, the program helped promote tolerance between different religions and people (Note: After 2002, the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) and Washington University administered a similar program which sent Uzbek religious leaders to the United States, but the program was halted after the Uzbek

government forced the closure of IREX's Tashkent office in ¶2005. End note.)

¶17. (C) Hafizov explained to poloff the history of the Yangi-Chek mosque, Ferghana's largest, which was constructed in the 1890s and was one of only four mosques in the Ferghana Valley which continued to operate in the Soviet era. He denied that the Uzbek government made the registration process for new mosques difficult, pointing out that while only 82 mosques functioned in the whole of Uzbekistan during the Soviet era, there were now more than 360 registered mosques in Ferghana province alone. He added that authorities further tolerated the operation of roughly 2,000 unofficial (and unregistered) mosques in Ferghana province. He explained that these mosques were often small and meant to serve individual mahallas (neighborhoods), and were sometimes based in community halls. He reported that roughly 2,500 individuals attended his mosque during Friday prayers.

¶18. (C) Hafizov reported that religious extremist organizations like Hizb ut-Tahrir were less of a threat now than they were during the 1990s, when he said the government tolerated the activities of Muslim missionaries, often Wahhabists, who came to the Ferghana Valley from the Middle East. Hafizov said that the government no longer tolerated the presence of such missionaries, which he believed has gone a long way in stemming the religious extremist threat in the Ferghana Valley. He also argued that the government has successfully promoted a moderate form of Islam.

¶19. (C) Hafizov had kind words for former Mufti Muhammad Sodiq, who participated in the same IV program in 2002. He described Sodiq as a "great religious scholar" who had done much to promote "moderate Islam" and "greater understanding between different religions." (Comment: Hafizov positive feelings for Sodiq contrasted sharply with those expressed by Uzbek historian and religious scholar Bakhtiyor Babadjanov during a recent meeting with Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford, see septel. Babadjanov argued that Sodiq was "not an extremist" but "anti-infidel" and preached intolerance of other religions. Babadjanov is a respected and legitimate scholar who nonetheless seems to know what is required of him to stay within the government's good graces. We believe the government is using him in an attempt to discredit former Mufti Mohammad Sodiq, who remains one of the most influential non-governmental figures in Uzbekistan. End comment.)

MEETING WITH IMAM TURSunOV IN NAMANGAN

¶20. (C) On June 27, poloff met with Abdulhay Tursunov, Imam of the Mulla Kyrgyz Mosque and Maddrassah complex in Namangan. Tursunov participated in the same IV program as Imam Hafizov, and also shared many positive memories of the United States with poloff. Tursunov expressed his view that not only should the United States continue to send Uzbek imams to the America, but that more Sunni religious leaders from the United States should visit Uzbekistan. He fondly remembered a visit in 2001 by National Chairman of the Islamic Supreme Council of America (ISCA) Shaykh Muhammad

Hisham Kabbani, who met with President Karimov.

TURSUNOV WARY OF SHIITE, WAHHABIST INFLUENCES

¶21. (C) However, Tursunov was adamant that only Sunni, and not Shiite, Muslim religious leaders should be sent to Uzbekistan from the United States, as the Shiites "have different religious practices." Tursunov also questioned why the United States retained close relations with Saudi Arabia, observing that Saudi Arabia aggressively promoted intolerant

Wahhabist ideology abroad, which he believed was a threat to both the United States and Uzbekistan. Tursunov was shocked to discover (at least what he considered to be) Wahhabist literature in Islamic libraries in the United States. He said he tried to explain to American Muslims the dangers of such material.

TOUR OF THE MULLA KYRGYZ MADDRASSAH AND MOSQUE

¶22. (C) Tursunov provided poloff a tour of his maddrassah, one of only eleven in Uzbekistan and two in Namangan province. Tursunov observed that during the Soviet era, the mosque and maddrassah complex were used as a wine factory. Currently, he said almost 200 students, all boys, studied at the maddrassah, which has a four-year course of study. Students may enter the maddrassah after completing the ninth grade of primary school and taking entrance exams in Uzbek history, Uzbek language, foreign language (either English or Russian), and mathematics. "Even if a boy already knows the Koran by heart, we will not accept him unless he scores well on the entrance exams," commented one teacher. Competition is fierce; Tursunov said that roughly ten candidates applied for every open slot.

¶23. (C) Students at the maddrassah spend approximately half their time studying religious subjects and half their time studying secular subjects, including foreign languages (Arabic, English, and Russian) and mathematics. Tursunov explained that the maddrassah provided a professional secondary education, roughly equivalent to that provided by colleges or lyceums, rather than a university-level education. Tursunov reported that almost all of the maddrassah graduates became imams, largely in Namangan province, while a few continued higher-level religious studies at the Tashkent Islamic University. He reported that one student from the maddrassah was studying in Egypt on an Uzbek-government program and that another student recently traveled to Egypt to participate in a Koran-reading contest. The maddrassah appeared somewhat threadbare but in no worse shape than other colleges and maddrassahs poloff has observed in Uzbekistan.

¶24. (C) Tursunov reported that shortly after independence, foreign "Wahhabists" operated the maddrassah for roughly two years and taught an "intolerant form of Islam" to its students. After recognizing the threat, Tursunov said the government forced out the alleged Wahhabists and made Tursunov the maddrassah's director. Tursunov reported that religious extremist groups were less active in Namangan province in recent years, and thanks to the "government's efforts," have largely been driven underground. He admitted that religious extremism was a problem in the 1990s, but alleged that extremist groups were no longer able to attract new recruits. He believed that Uzbeks were more susceptible to the influence of extremist groups shortly after independence, as they knew little about "true Islam" during the Soviet era. However, Tursunov believed that the government had adequately promoted a moderate Islam, and extremist ideology was therefore becoming less attractive to citizens.

¶25. (C) Tursunov also provided poloff a tour of the one-hundred year old Mulla Kyrgyz Mosque, whose unique cupola-shaped design is based on the ancient Sultan Sanjar mausoleum in Merv, Turkmenistan. Tursunov said that roughly

150 individuals attended Friday prayers at the mosque, mostly students and teachers at the maddrassah, though local residents were welcome to attend as well. Tursunov explained that fourth-year students at the maddrassah practiced leading Friday prayers at the mosque. Poloff observed that the courtyard of the mosque, unlike that of most other mosques in

Uzbekistan, was full of government propaganda posters, possibly due to the presence of the maddrassah.

FRIDAY PRAYERS AT NAMANGAN'S LARGEST MOSQUE

¶26. (C) After sharing lunch at the maddrassah, Imam Tursunov invited poloff to attend Friday prayers at the Mulla Bazaar mosque, Namangan's largest, which was built in 1989. Despite arriving half an hour early, poloff observed that already over a thousand individuals were there, completely filling the two floors of the mosque itself. By the time the prayers had begun, the crowd had swelled to perhaps two or three thousand individuals, all men (Note: According to Uzbek custom, women rarely attend Friday prayers at mosques. End note.) Poloff observed that men of all ages were well-represented in the crowd, especially those under 30 years of age. In addition, poloff observed many teenagers and even boys under the age of ten, despite frequent reports on independent websites that police officers often prevented young boys and teenagers from attending Friday prayers. Police were present outside the mosque and blocked off the adjacent street, but the number of officers did not appear excessive and seemed to be in line with normal crowd-control procedures.

¶27. (C) After the prayers, Imam Tursunov introduced poloff to an elderly sheikh, who used to teach Islamic jurisprudence at the Mir-i Arab Maddrassah in Bukhara, which before independence was the only government-approved maddrassah in the entire Soviet Union. The sheikh noted that many of his students from the Soviet era are now important religious leaders throughout the former Soviet Union, including former and current Muftis in Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Kazan, Azerbaijan and the five Central Asian republics. He noted that the former President of Chechnya, Akhmad Kadyrov, also studied at the Mir-i Arab Maddrassah.

COMMENT

¶28. (C) While imams at state-sanctioned mosques may be expected to downplay the threat of religious extremism, their observations that extremist groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir have become less active in the Ferghana Valley tracks with what poloff was told by independent human rights activists who have covered the issue for years. The exact reasons for the decline in extremist activity remain unclear. While it is possible that extremist groups have only become less visible and have not, in fact, become less active, we do not believe this is the case. Rather, we agree with human rights activists that the government's long-standing repressive measures against suspected members have deterred new recruits. It is also possible that many of their members have already been sentenced to prison (and are not being released when they finish their sentences). As the activists also pointed out, another possibility is that increased labor migration from the region has drained the pool of available recruits. We should also not discount the possibility that the government has been more successful in recent years in promoting a more moderate brand of Islam. The open displays of moderate religious observance that poloff viewed in the Ferghana Valley also tracks with our own observations that religious freedom has modestly increased lately for the country's Muslims, the vast majority of the population.

¶29. (C) It is welcome news that the number of individuals convicted on religious extremism charges appears to be declining, particularly in the Ferghana Valley, the traditional hotbed of religious conservatism in Uzbekistan (and Central Asia as a whole). Cases of individuals being

convicted of religious extremism and mistreated by Uzbek

authorities continue in other regions of the country. Recently, for example, two women in Tashkent were convicted of membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir. On June 20, a human rights activist reported that four individuals were tortured and sentenced to six years' imprisonment in Surkhundarya province (ref C). In March, 13 individuals were convicted of religious extremism in Bukhara based on coerced testimony (ref D). Nevertheless, despite the continuation of such cases, the overall number of convictions appears to have declined in the past year. Our long-standing concern is that individuals in religious extremism cases are often denied due process of law and are physically abused.

130. (C) We have now heard from multiple human rights activists representing different organizations that conditions at Uzbek prisons have improved in the past year, including for religious prisoners. We believe that improving conditions, including the government's apparent decision to reintegrate religious prisoners with the general prison population, is at least partly the result of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) restarting prison visits in March. We also believe that the continuation of ICRC prison visits remains the best hope for encouraging further improvement in prison conditions.

131. (C) On a less positive note, though the government has released some religious prisoners in recent years, including Madmarov's son, it continues to arbitrarily lengthen the sentences of many other religious prisoners. Human rights groups frequently estimate that between 5,000 and 7,000 political prisoners reside in Uzbek jails, the vast majority of whom were sentenced on religious extremism charges (we know of approximately only 30 imprisoned human rights activists and political opposition figures). While some of these individuals are actual religious extremists, others have been imprisoned on false charges of religious extremism, and many more were probably imprisoned after attending little more than introductory meetings of extremist cells. Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford and other U.S. officials are continuing to negotiate steps the Uzbek government could take to review the cases of such individuals. We believe that a government commission might be the best tool for helping some of these individuals be amnestied and released from prison.

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